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# Birding Arabuko-Sokoke Forest and Kenya's northern coast

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**Résumé:** La côte nord du Kenya offre d'excellentes chances d'observer les oiseaux et jouit d'un accès facile d'Europe à la ville côtière de Mombasa. Dans la présente communication, la forêt d'Arabuko-Sokoke ainsi que plusieurs autres sites, comme Mida Creek et l'embouchure de la rivière Sabaki, sont décrits et accompagnés de notes sur la façon de s'y rendre. Des détails supplémentaires sur un nombre d'espèces et de groupes d'espèces rares sont également fournis.

With some of the most accessible accommodation in East Africa, and cheap package deals and flights to Mombasa from all over Europe, Kenya's coastal province offers outstanding value to the visiting birder. In this article, I concentrate on the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest area, including Mida Creek and the Sabaki river mouth, as well as some of the less well-known sites, like Lake Jilore. You can reach all of these places easily from Watamu and Malindi, and they offer rewarding birding in a small area. Birders with more time and money can travel inland to the rest of Kenya's birding destinations. Many, including Tsavo East National Park and the Taita Hills, are within a day's drive.

The opening of a spectacular bridge spanning Kilifi Creek, a water crossing by ferry that used to drive even the most patient to despair, now means that the north coast is within easy reach of Mombasa by car, *matatu* or bus. You can drive the distance in less than two hours, allowing gentle birding *en route* that guarantees the ubiquitous **Indian House Crow** *Corvus splendens*, now infesting the coast to the detriment of smaller song birds, as well as coastal specialities like **Zanzibar Euplectes nigroventris** and **Black-winged Red Bishops** *E. hordeaceus*, both of which turn up in roadside pools which flood in the long rains, especially during April, the wettest month. Unlike its well-marked inland cousin, the pale coastal race of **Winding Cisticola** *Cisticola galactotes haematocephala* is common in a wide range of wet and dry habitats. Keep an eye out for shy **Brown-headed Parrots** *Poicephalus cryptoxanthus* among the baobabs too, especially just south of Kilifi.

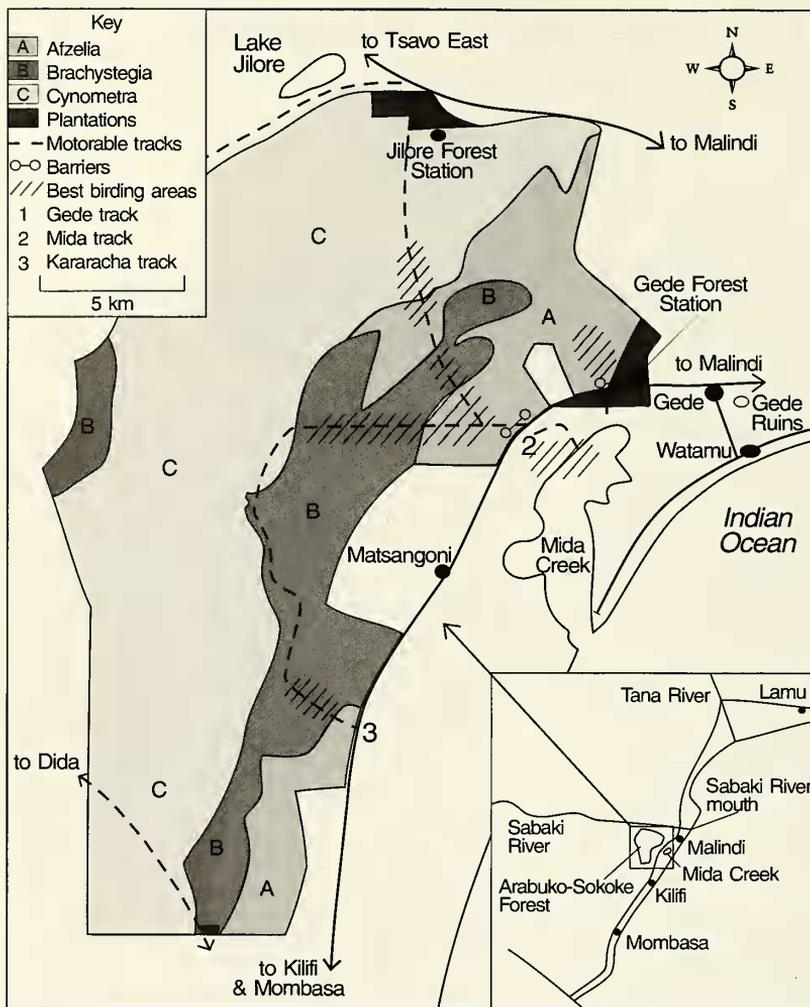
To Kilifi, the main road is good and fast and, although there are no well known sites before you reach Arabuko-Sokoke and Mida Creek, it is worth a little birding time. From Kilifi to Malindi, the road is peppered with pot-holes, some well capable of shredding a tyre or dislodging an exhaust, so please be

careful, and watch your rear mirror for the approach of coast buses, whose drivers treat even the most cavernous holes with total disdain.

Although I have written this paper with the specific purpose of encouraging birders to visit the north coast of Kenya, it is worth noting that these sites lie at the centre of one of Africa's most popular tourist destinations. Breaks at hotels, like the Turtle Bay Beach Club in Watamu and The Driftwood Club in Malindi, are great family holidays with activities ranging from diving to wind-surfing, sailing to deep sea fishing, as well as all the other glories of a tropical seaside environment (ripe mangoes spring instantly to mind). Hospitality is the rule and, whatever their age, there will always be distractions for members of your party who are not keen on birding!

## Arabuko-Sokoke Forest

As you drive north from Kilifi, Arabuko-Sokoke Forest forms a boundary immediately west of the road for almost 25km. Standing just inland of Mida Creek and the coastal beaches of Watamu, it is the largest remaining stand of indigenous coastal forest in Kenya, spreading over 372 km<sup>2</sup>. Low-lying, Sokoke barely rises above 60m. Soils are of two principal sorts, white and dark red, the former probably alluvial or sea sand in origin, the latter an infertile soil that stretches inland to Tsavo. The switch from white to red soil is striking, taking place over a few metres, and contributing to the equally abrupt changes in vegetation (see below). There is no permanent water, although a large river, the Sabaki, flows to the north. Ephemeral pools form in the rains and may extend to over 2ha in exceptional years. They form interesting oases in the forest and attract cranes and herons, as well as migrant waders. Annual rainfall is dominated by a long rainy season in April, May and June, with mean annual rainfall rarely exceeding 1000mm. The name of the forest is derived from Giriama and Sanje words, *arabuko* meaning place of



Map of Arabuko-Sokoke Forest  
*Le plan de forêt d'Arabuko-Sokoké*

thin elephants, and *sokoke* referring to the dense shady thickets typical of the red soil. The lighter, airier vegetation of the white soil is called *sosoni*.

A kilometre south of Gede village lies the entrance to Gede Forest Station, headquarters of both the Forest Department and the Kenya Wildlife Service, joint forest managers, and coastal office of the Kenya Forest Research Institute, which maintains a bank of seeds collected in Sokoke. You will find trees with their scientific names initialled in large white letters, eg. A.c. for *Afzelia cuanzensis*, throughout the forest. A visit to Gede Forest Station is essential for you to register yourself in the tourist records. Please take the time to drop in, whether you are taking a guide or not (more of guides below). Whilst it may seem like an inconvenience, your visit is a critical support for the moves to conserve

Sokoke, and so needs recording.

Some 233 bird species have been observed in the forest, including some of Kenya's, and East Africa's, most elusive. Seeking out Sokoke's special birds needs time, two or three days at least, and an appreciation that the division of the forest into three broad habitat types (dominated by different tree species: *Afzelia*, *Brachystegia* and *Cynometra*), strongly influences their distribution. To see the best range of species, you would need to spend time in each area. Crossing the forest west to east you come across these habitats in alphabetical order, A>B>C, the *Afzelia* giving way to *Brachystegia*, and then to *Cynometra*, the latter coinciding with a dramatic change of soil colour from white to red.

Three key access points exist, all leading west from the main Mombasa Road, and all lying south of Gede village. One km south of Gede Forest Station is the Gede walking trail; a small shaded car park gives access to two short trails in

the wettest *Afzelia* forest. This is an excellent area for all the *Afzelia* birds. Way to the south, 22km from Gede Forest Station, is the Kararacha track which, after a thin belt of rather poor *Afzelia* forest, gives way to excellent *Brachystegia* woodland, and access to a system of tracks that leads deep into Sokoke, tracks that finally reach the *nyari*, or view point, which offers an outstanding place from where to look out over the forest canopy towards the Indian Ocean. This area is worth exploring if you have time but, for the purposes of this account, I intend to concentrate on the so-called Mida, or Nature Reserve track, which enters the forest 5.8km south of the forest station. In Kenya, ten per cent of all natural forest is set aside as strict nature reserve, but there is no obvious way of distinguishing the nature reserve on the ground in Sokoke. Well-worked, the

Mida track, and those that branch from it, has the potential to offer all the key forest bird species.

For the first kilometre, the Mida track passes through heavily degraded forest with little or no canopy. Early in the morning, literally at first light, or after heavy rain, the track may yield **Spotted Ground-thrush** *Turdus fischeri* and perhaps a party of **Crested Guineafowl** *Guttera edouardi* drying out. On most days, however, you should pass on to the first junction at one kilometre. Here the road swings right towards Jilore, but it is worth driving straight ahead since the habitat quality improves at once. You are soon in good *Afzelia* forest, the track becoming a tunnel over which mature tree canopies form a roof. After a further 2.1km, the forest suddenly changes into *Brachystegia* woodland, and it is here that you will find the best early morning birding, leaving a return to the cool of the *Afzelia* for later.

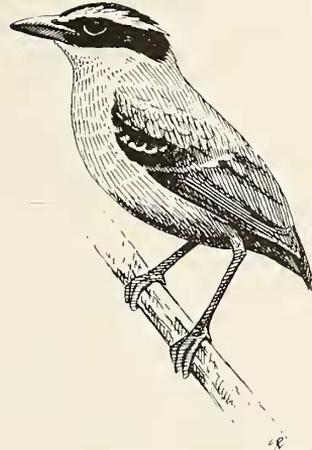
Pressing on through the *Brachystegia* eventually leads one to *Cynometra* forest, but only after another five kilometres, and so it is really better to return to the junction close to the main road and rejoin the track towards Jilore Forest Station. This passes through *Afzelia*, then *Brachystegia* and, after a short climb, leads down into *Cynometra* forest with the white soil giving way to red at the bottom of a slight escarpment. A number of side tracks lead off into all three habitat types and are worth exploring. Some of the *Cynometra* forest is degraded but, because it is the most accessible of this habitat type, and supports a good population of **Sokoke Scops Owls** *Otus ireneae*, it definitely needs investigation.

Walking or slow-driving the roads and tracks can yield a range of birds and mammals. It is worth stopping at corners and scanning far ahead, taking special account of dips and damp places, where **Peter's Twinspots** *Hypargos niveoguttatus* like to forage. **Sokoke Pipit** *Anthus sokokensis* is a rare species that regularly ventures onto well-shaded tracks. It typically flies up into the middle storey before dropping back onto the forest floor to resume foraging. **Golden-rumped Elephant-shrew** *Rhynchocyon chrysopygus* and **Suni** *Neotragus moschatus*, as well as **Yellow Baboon** *Papio cyanocephalus* and **Sykes' Monkeys** *Cercopithecus albogularis*, are mammals that you can often see on the roads, especially early in the morning. Watch for birds crossing ahead as well, since it is often the first evidence one sees of mixed species flocks.

**Time of day:** Like most African birding sites, Sokoke is best early in the morning, from sunrise at about 06.00h, until around 09.00h, after which time bird activity tends to fall away. The coast heats up quickly and, although you can find birds throughout the day, it is worth getting into the forest at first light. The cool of

the evening brings another peak of activity, but it does not compare with the morning and, unless you are on your way in to search for scops owls, you are better off birding at Mida or Sabaki for waders, gulls and terns.

**Seasonality:** Sokoke is interesting all year round, but it is hardest to bird in the dry season, with little rain falling from December to March. Several of the species, notably **Spotted Ground-thrush**, **Red-capped Robin Chat** *Cossypha natalensis* and the near-mystical



African Pitta *Pitta angolensis*  
by Craig Robson

**African Pitta** *Pitta angolensis* are intra-African migrants and absent during the dry season. They return in the long rains that start in earnest in April and last through May and June, finally giving way to sporadic showers until the short rains in October and November.

In truth, my A>B>C vegetation classification is an oversimplification but, from a birding point of view, it does make sense since the three habitats offer different birds and opportunities for watching. I give below general notes on each type, followed by detailed notes on some of the more difficult species at the end. This is not a comprehensive treatment, but I hope that it gives a flavour of the birding available in Sokoke.

### ***Afzelia***

The first forest that one encounters, *Afzelia*, is dense, diverse, and forms a belt of lush habitat which is cool, and where the birds tend to become active slightly later in the morning than in the *Brachystegia* woodland. Birds to look for here tend to be shy and shade-loving, often in the low or middle canopy. Despite their loud calls, many species are hard to find in the tangles: **Crested Flycatcher** *Trochocercus cyanomelas*, **Fischer's Phyllastrephus** *fischeri* and **Tiny Greenbul** *P. debilis*, **Forest Batis** *Batis mixta*, and **Olive Nectarinia** *olivacea* and **Plain-backed Sunbird** *Anthreptes reichenowi*. It is the best area for **East Coast**

**Akalat** *Sheppardia gunningi* which, like **Green Tinkerbird** *Pogoniulus simplex*, is notoriously cryptic. These species rarely invade the *Brachystegia*, so you have to find them in the *Afzelia*. **Sokoke Pipit** occurs at reasonable densities, but is slightly easier to locate in the more open *Brachystegia*. Mixed bird flocks will yield several species together, including **Little Yellow Flycatchers** *Erythrocerus holochlorus* or **Black-headed Apalises** *Apalis melanocephala* (which occur in the low and middle canopies in all three forest types), and perhaps attracting **Ashy Muscivora** *caerulescens* and **Paradise Flycatchers** *Terpsiphone viridis*. The *Afzelia* is the best area for **Fischer's Turaco** *Tauraco fischeri*, but beware following up calls since they can carry a long way and, despite their size and obvious colourfulness, turacos tend to be rather shy, and skilled at blending into the background.

Impressive ant trails are a particular feature of forest like Sokoke, especially after heavy rain. If you are careful, they can yield shy species like the migrant **Red-capped Robin Chat**, and residents like **Red-tailed Ant-thrush** *Neocossyphus rufus*, **Eastern Bearded Scrub Robin** *Cercotrichas quadrivirgata* and **East Coast Akalat**. Well-established ribbon trails where the ants - known as *stafu* - are simply moving from A to B, are less productive than feeding parties, where they move on a broad front flushing lots of insects. As many as 20-30 birds may gather and you may be rewarded with good views simply by sitting quietly nearby. The larger soldier ants have a very powerful bite, and an uncanny capacity to seek out a tender spot before using it, so a circumspect watch of the trail's progress is well worth maintaining!

## **Brachystegia**

*Brachystegia* woodland is the most open habitat and the easiest to bird. Where the woodland has been degraded, it forms a patchwork of tree stands and open glades. The tree *Brachystegia spiciformis* dominates; like most species in the forest, it is deciduous. It sheds its leaves annually and bursts into new, reddish leaf in the rains, a colour which soon gives way to a delicate grey-green. The canopy is the key habitat here, supporting a range of special birds, notably **Clarke's Weaver** *Ploceus golandi*, the diminutive **Amani Sunbird** *Anthreptes pallidigaster* and **East Coast Batis** *Batis soror*, which replaces the **Forest Batis** of the *Afzelia* and *Cynometra* forest. This is the best place to find **Mombasa Woodpecker** *Campethera mombassica*, (only recently split from **Golden-tailed** *C. abingoni*), and **Green Barbet** *Buccanodon olivaceum*, with its distinctive far-carrying *tok-tok-tok*. A few pairs of the striking **Black-collared Barbet**

*Lybius torquatus* also still occur here, often close to the ephemeral pools deep in the forest. Less commonly, **Amethyst Sunbird** *Nectarinia amethystina*, **Lead-coloured Flycatcher** *Myioparus plumbeus*, which has a distinctive trilling phone-like call, and **Green-capped Eremomela** *Eremomela scotops*, can all be found in the *Brachystegia*.

Birders are well aware of the value of seeking out **mixed species flocks** in forests, since they can often provide views of a number of species together. Two hypotheses are usually suggested to explain the phenomenon: improved feeding opportunities as the progressing flock flushes insects, or because of better predator detection, with numerous pairs of eyes watching out for raptors like **Great Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter melanoleucus* and **African Goshawk** *A. tachiro*. In the *Brachystegia*, flocks build around two species of **helmet-shrike**, **Chestnut-fronted** *Prionops scopifrons*, a coastal speciality and by far the commoner bird, and **Retz's** *P. retzi* which occurs in small groups of between five and eight individuals, and seems shyer. The **Chestnut-fronted Helmet-shrikes** appear to manipulate the presence of other birds by calling, their noisy trilling drawing in other species from all around.



Clarke's Weaver *Ploceus golandi*  
by Martin Woodcock

Followers include **Dark-backed Weaver** *Ploceus bicolor*, **Scimitarbill** *Phoeniculus cyanomelas*, **Little Spotted** *Campethera cailliautii* and **Mombasa Woodpeckers**, **Green Wood-hoopoe** *Phoeniculus purpureus*, **Crowned Hornbill** *Tockus albotoxus*, **Black-headed Oriole** *Oriolus larvatus* and the migrant **African Golden Oriole** *O. auratus* (there are a few records of the rare **Green-headed Oriole** *O.*

*chlorocephalus*), and less often, **Yellow-bellied Greenbul** *Chlorocichla flaviventris*, **Nicator** *Nicator chloris* and **Narina's Trogon** *Apaloderma narina*. When they are in the forest, Clarke's Weavers (see below) regularly join these flocks, swelling numbers to hundreds.

### **Cynometra**

This forest is so dense, that birding is best confined to seeking those species that cannot be found in the *Afzelia* and *Brachystegia*. The scops owl is the main target (see species accounts below), but daytime birding can bring an opportunity to see the day-glo **Four-coloured Bush-shrike** *Malaconotus quadricolor*. Like so many bush-shrikes, its capacity to skulk, even at close quarters, is amazing; so it is always tempting to resort to a tape. Its clarion call, which Newman<sup>1</sup> describes well as *kong-kong-koit*, is distinctive and a characteristic sound of the *Cynometra*, although individuals will slur the call, and they have a notable range of near-catarrhal clicks and wheezes as well. The *Cynometra* is also full of **Tiny Greenbuls** and **Crested Flycatchers**, but the really dense undergrowth always makes it easier to locate them in the *Afzelia*.

Several species in Sokoke respond to playback, but please remember that birds, such as **Barred Owlet** *Glaucidium capense*, do so because they believe the taped calls to be from a territorial intruder. Excessive use of playback in Sokoke has driven some owlets off well-established territories. Regular or loud tape-use creates real problems and should never be exploited.

The forest is degraded in many areas, so bush-species like **Black-backed Puffback** *Dryoscopus cubla*, **Zanzibar Sombre Greenbul** *Andropadus importunus*, **Common Bulbul** *Pycnonotus barbatus* and **Mouse-coloured Sunbird** *Nectarinia veroxii* have invaded. Selective felling of hardwood trees like *Afzelia cuanzenis* for building and furniture, and

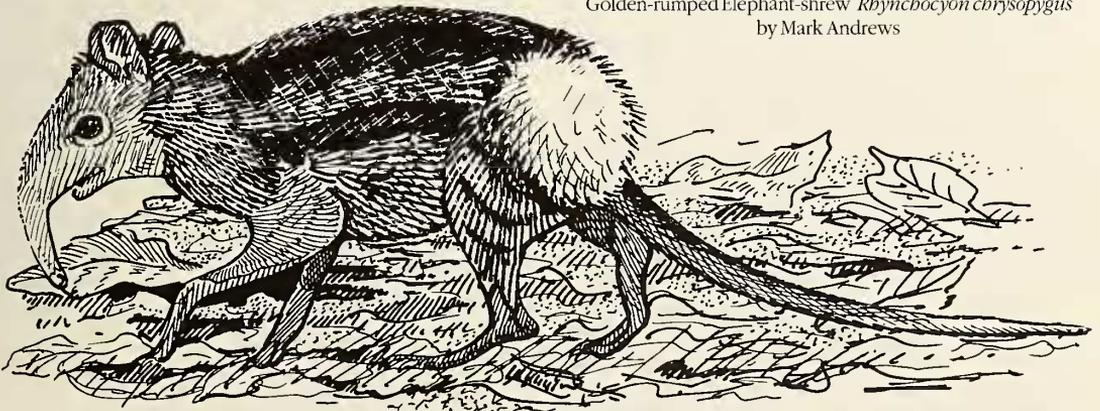
*Brachylaena buillensis* for the carving trade, has modified large swathes of Sokoke and many of the birds, especially in the *Brachystegia* and *Cynometra*, are not true forest species.

**Other wildlife:** visitors to Sokoke should look out for several remarkable mammals. There are a small number of **African Elephants** *Loxodonta africana*, probably fewer than a hundred, but of far greater interest are the **elephant-shrews**, both **Golden-rumped** (largely confined to the white soil area and most common in the wetter *Afzelia* forest), and **Four-toed** *Petrodomus tetradactylus* (generally on red soil, nocturnal and mainly seen during scops owl forays). **Golden-rumped Elephant-shrew** is endemic to the Sokoke area and an excellent lifer mammal. There are two spectacular rufous-red squirrels that are worth looking out for: **Red-bellied Coast Squirrel** *Funisciurus palliatus* and **Red-legged Sun Squirrel** *Heliosciurus rufobrachium*. The latter is more brightly coloured, more common and has a rather bird-like chipping call, which can cause confusion!

Small antelopes include **Suni** and duikers of which one, **Ader's Duiker** *Cephalophus adersi*, is confined to Sokoke and Zanzibar. There are three primate species, **Yellow Baboon**, **Sykes'** and **Vervet Monkeys** *Cercopithecus aethiops*, and, at night, there is always a chance of bush-babies or galagos, which call very loudly. Two species occur: the large **Garnett's Galago** *Galago garnetti* and smaller **Zanzibar Galago** *G. zanzibaricus*. Night drives can also yield **White-tailed Mongoose** *Ichneumia albicauda*, **Blotched Genet** *Genetta tigrina*, **African Civet** *Civetta africana*, and even **Caracal** *Felis caracal* on the red soil.

**Guides:** Taking a guide into the forest at Sokoke can help in a number of ways, not least by saving time locating the best patches of the three habitat types for birding. Guides are based at Gede Forest Station and in

Golden-rumped Elephant-shrew *Rhynchocyon chrysopygus*  
by Mark Andrews



some of the Watamu Hotels (notably Turtle Bay Beach Club). Most experienced among them is David Ngala, who has made his reputation leading people to see the **Sokoke Scops Owl**. You can find David at Gede; he has an outstanding knowledge of all the birds of Arabuko-Sokoke and their calls.

## Gede Ruins

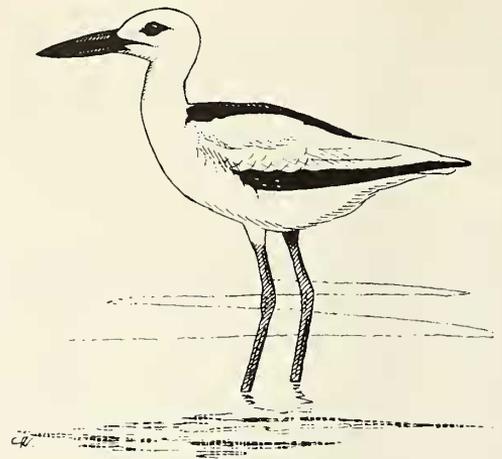
Gede Ruins, the site of an old Arab town, can provide excellent birding, but lacks the variety and many of the species found in Sokoke. The ruins lie about one kilometre from Gede village and are well signposted from opposite the mosque on the Watamu road. It is worth visiting very early in the morning, both to escape the crowds of sightseers, which pile in during the rest of the day, and because the forest seems drained of birds and bird song when the heat sets in. Only the drowsing *tok-tok-tok* of Green Barbet persists. A network of paths has been cleared and is swept on a regular basis, so it is possible to move quietly, listening for the tell-tale sounds of birds foraging in the dry litter.

Once almost guaranteed at Gede, **Spotted Ground-thrush** is now hard to find. It may emerge onto the paths at first light (along with **Red-capped Robin Chat** and **Eastern Bearded Scrub-robin**). **African Pitta** is very rarely, if ever, now seen. The ruins are good for **Fischer's Turaco** and the two large species of **hornbill**: **Silvery-cheeked** *Bycanistes brevis* and **Trumpeter** *B. bucinator*, both of which call variations on a theme of strangled goats and crying babies. **Silvery-cheeked** are often seen in the mature *Casuarina* trees along the coast at Watamu. There is also a nest of **Palm-nut Vulture** *Gypobierax angolensis* in the tallest tree in the main square. It is worth visiting Gede (the ruins are interesting too!) but not at the expense of a morning in the main forest.

## Mida Creek

Mida Creek is the most important site for wintering shorebirds on the Kenya coast. Some 5000 birds regularly shelter on the sand banks along the side of the creek, particularly its inner reaches. It provides a good opportunity to observe a wide range of waders, including the extraordinary **Crab Plover** *Dromas ardeola*. **Carmine Bee-eaters** *Merops nubicus* (the northern race *nubicus* now split from the southern *nubicoides*, which reaches Tanzania as a migrant) once roosted in the mangroves, in large numbers, from September to March, but they are present now in smaller numbers, and should be watched out for throughout the area.

**Crab Plover** is undoubtedly the bird to see. Flocks of several hundred build up in Mida Creek at the height of the northern winter, from August to April. Large numbers of commoner waders include delights like



Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola*  
by Craig Robson

**Terek Sandpiper** *Xenus cinereus* and both **Great** *Charadrius leschenaultii* and **Mongolian** or **Lesser Sandplovers** *C. mongolus*. Regular rarities include parties of **Broad-billed Sandpiper** *Limicola falcinellus*, but they are more often seen at Sabaki, while vagrants have included **Red-necked Stint** *Calidris ruficollis*.

Finding the best place to watch birds is not easy, although the creek can be approached from the water or by land. The best way in is opposite the Mida-Jilore track barrier to the Forest, 6.8 km south of the Gede-Watamu road junction. You can drive or walk down a track through *Eucalyptus* trees, a Forest Department plantation, for 150m, then turn left for 400m, and right again. If you follow the fairly straight sandy road for about 800m this will lead you to the edge of the creek. The tracks are passable to four-wheel drive vehicles, even in the rains, but may become inaccessible to normal vehicles. This is the best area for waders, especially on an incoming tide, as the water pushes the birds closer and closer to the mangroves fringing the creek. The mangroves form an excellent natural hide and you can get very close to the birds if you are patient. The creek is home to fishermen who are entitled to fish there, using traditional methods. Security is normally good, but you should take care and lock cars and hide valuables or, if possible, leave someone watching over your vehicle.

Sea approaches mean hiring a boat from one of the hotels in Watamu, or joining an organised trip. Contact Ocean Sports or Turtle Bay Beach Club for details. Travelling by boat, you can approach a number of species very closely, including **Black Herons** *Egretta ardesiaca*. You will normally be able to see tide tables displayed in the foyers of the coast hotels, or you can buy copies from many of the Malindi shops.

## Sabaki River

Another outstanding area for shorebirds, terns and gulls is the mouth of the Sabaki River. You can approach this along the beach from Malindi, about a two hour walk from below the Golf Club, or along the Lamu Road: the river bridge is six kilometres north of Malindi. From the bridge there are two options, walking seawards on the north or south bank of the river, and always the risk that roosts will be on the wrong side when you get there! Low tide exposes wet sand and mud on the southern shore, and this attracts large numbers of feeding waders; I tended to visit that side. Visiting with the afternoon sun behind you can bring outstanding lighting conditions, but it is important to leave enough time to get back to your vehicle before dark. It is also worth wearing a hat and taking some water to drink, since there is no shade near the birds. It is best to deal with security by taking someone with you to watch over a vehicle. You can also park closer to the barrier, just over the bridge, and ask the police there to mind your car. The scrubby habitat *en route* to the river mouth can yield interesting birds such as **Scaly Babbler** *Turdoides squamulatus*, **Yellowbill** *Ceuthmochares aereus* and **Fire-fronted Bishop** *Euplectes diadematus*.

Large flocks of gulls and terns build up at Sabaki, especially in the winter. Look out for, among others, **White-cheeked Tern** *Sterna repressa*, **Caspian S. caspia**, **Roseate** *S. dougallii*, which often breeds on Whale Island, opposite the mouth of Mida Creek, in July and August, **Crested** *S. bergii*, **Lesser Crested** *S. bengalensis*, **Bridled** *S. anaethetus* and **Sooty** *S. fuscata*, as well as the vagrant, **Sandwich** *S. sandvicensis*, **Terns**. Both **Saunders's Little Tern** *Sterna albifrons saundersi*, which is probably a good species, and **White-winged Black Terns** *Chlidonias leucopterus* can be common and **Gull-billed Terns** *Gelochelidon nilotica* occur in Sabaki and Mida. Both **Common** (or **Brown**) *Anous stolidus* and less common **Lesser Noddies** *A. tenuirostris* occur offshore.

Large numbers of shorebirds are always present in winter, with Sabaki being the best site for **Broad-billed Sandpiper**, with as many as 60 wintering there. Along the beach, and at the edge of the dunes south of the river, it is usually easy to find **White-fronted Sand Plover** *Charadrius marginatus* and, from March to September, the dunes are full of **Madagascar Pratincoles** *Glareola ocularis*. **African Skimmer** *Rynchops flavirostris* may occur and the dunes may shelter ephemeral pools that are worth investigating.

## Lake Jilore

Just inland from Sokoke there is a remarkable seasonal expanse of water called Lake Jilore. It can be seen from

the Malindi-Tsavo road which, just beyond Jilore Forest Station, bends to the the right and descends steeply to cross the valley which contains the lake, well to the left, well to the left. Since the lake varies seasonally in extent, it is hard to give accurate directions on the best ways in. You can approach from the far side of the valley having parked in Jilore Secondary School, which perches on the ridge above the lake. Alternatively, you can follow the forest's eastern boundary, driving straight on where the Tsavo Road bends steeply down to the right. The lake is then below the forest boundary to the right and can be reached by one of the many cattle and goat tracks that lead down – a good one slopes off 3.2km from the Jilore road. Some are closer to the shore and more open than others, but it is worth struggling the short distance (less than 1km) which then brings you to this potentially bird-filled lake. The lake is shallow and fringed by marsh vegetation when water levels are high, but it can dry out completely and, when this happens, people plant maize, tomatoes and tobacco on the valley floor. Simply scanning the shore turns up plenty of interesting birds, but it is worth investigating the numerous small bays that may hold skulkers such as **Painted Snipe** *Rostratula benghalensis*.

The range of waterbirds occurring obviously depends on lake levels, but species like **Open-billed Stork** *Anastomus lamelligerus*, **Saddle-billed Stork** *Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis*, **African Spoonbill** *Platalea alba*, **Night Heron** *Nycticorax nycticorax* and **Allen's Gallinule** *Porphyrio alleni* have all been observed. **Bee-eaters** flight over the lake with large numbers of **Madagascar** *Merops superciliosus*, **Carmine** and **White-throated** *M. albicollis* sometimes present together. You can reach the lake easily from the forest, simply follow the main Mida-Jilore track until it joins the Tsavo road, 16km from the Malindi road entrance, and then turn left towards Tsavo. Another 500m and the road drops steeply to cross the valley containing the lake. When it is full, Lake Jilore offers concentrations of birds that provide a really excellent evening's birding.

## Travelling further north

Driving further north from Malindi than the Sabaki River leads ultimately to the banks of the Tana. **Local advice should always be sought before travelling in this area:** it is remote and can be very dangerous, despite the fact that the Lamu buses use the road several times a day. The highlight of one my trips north took place at the barrier on the Tana River bridge where a young soldier kindly noted, after my inquiry about security, that I would be all right if I wasn't shot. Pretty reassuring. The Garsen heronry is about three kilome-

tres downstream of the new Tana bridge on the south side of the river; it can be reached only on foot. It was inactive when I visited in 1992, but *Borassus Palms* along the Tana provided stunning views of **Red-necked Falcon** *Falco chicquera* and **Morning Thrush** *Cichladusa arquata*. The heronry is about one kilometre from the river on the far side of an old oxbow lake; the nests are low in the trees. Returning from the heronry and turning back towards Malindi, away from Garsen, you pass a road on your left that leads to Tarasaa. Just beyond the village is another seasonal lake, Shaka Babo, which was heaving with **Open-billed Storks**, **African Spoonbills** and **White Pelican** *Pelecanus onocrotalus* in June 1992, but which is sometimes drained for agriculture. With the rains there are numerous seasonal freshwater and saline pools that provide interesting birding along the northern road. One bird to look out for is the north-eastern race of **Lilac-breasted Roller** *Coracias caudata lorti* which has the lilac restricted to the throat, and which some consider a good species.

Birds like **Malindi Pipit** *Anthus melindae* and **Violet-breasted Sunbird** *Nectarinia pembae* can be found at Karawa, approximately 65km north of the Sabaki River bridge, through the villages of Mambui and Gongoni. Look for a rusting sign on the right to Karawa Industries, and drive 2.8km into the salt complex turning right down onto sparsely vegetated salt flats. The pipit is found on these flats, and the sunbird in the surrounding bush. Much of this area is virgin birding territory and rarely visited, so it would be wise to explore it only when you have exhausted the options for birding in and around Arabuko-Sokoke.

## Equipment

Binoculars with low magnification (7x- or 8x- are ideal) and close focusing are best for forest birding, but a telescope might provide a good view of some of the canopy top species like **Amani Sunbird**. Scopes are almost essential for Mida Creek, Sabaki River mouth and Lake Jilore. Carrying a compass in the forest, and elsewhere, is always wise because it is easy to be tempted away from the security of paths by an interesting call, and equally easy to become disorientated. In the forest, it is worth remembering to take a plastic bag or two to protect camera lenses and other optical equipment from dust and sand. If you plan a visit in the rains, remember to pack a folding umbrella. For all these sites, lightweight footwear, such as trainers, and equally lightweight long trousers and shirts are ideal. Wear a hat if you are not used to the heat and, if you are planning to walk far from your vehicle, please carry some water with you. It is easy to become dehydrated.

## How to reach the area and where to stay

The area is within 90 minutes drive of the northern outskirts of Mombasa. Take the main road that reaches the southernmost end of Sokoke forest just north of Kilifi. It is as well to stay in the area, which boasts a wide range of hotels (at an equally wide range of prices) in both Malindi and Watamu. A regular bus service runs north and south to Malindi, stopping at Gede village for Watamu, as do colourful and packed *matatus* (bush taxis). Most bird tours prefer Watamu since it is only 15 minutes drive from Sokoke and Mida Creek, and the hotels there, including Hemingways, Ocean Sports and Turtle Bay Beach Club, are all birder-aware and willing to provide early breakfasts, packed lunches and other requirements. You could also stay in guest houses and self-catering accommodation and there are plenty of restaurants and cafes in both places. Car hire is available in Malindi and Watamu and you can hire bicycles by the day in Watamu village. Most hotels have transport which you can hire by the day.

## Notes on species and groups of particular interest:

Here are additional notes on the six Red Data Book birds and some further notes on species which are hard to see or distinguish in the forest.

**Sokoke Scops Owl:** although recently found in the Usambaras in northern Tanzania, Sokoke Scops Owl still remains the jewel of a Sokoke visit. Only discovered in 1965, it is confined to the red-soil forest dominated by *Cynometra webberi*, and never easy to find. By far the best method is to take advantage of the expertise of David Ngala, the resident guide at Gede Forest Station. Visits involve an early evening drive into the forest (at around 17.45h), followed by a search for a calling scops owl, with which David establishes a duet, before leading birders into the thickets to spotlight the bird. The trip may last from one to several hours, depending on the ease with which he locates a scops owl, but it remains a thrilling way of spending an evening birding. At the same time, you may easily see nocturnal mammals like **Four-toed Elephant-shrew** or **White-tailed Mongoose**.

**Spotted Ground-thrush:** this is an intra-African migrant which is only present from May to November. It is probably the hardest of the six species to guarantee, since the birds hug deep shade and have developed skulking to an art form. A lucky few may encounter ground-thrushes very early in the morning, at the first moment of light, when the birds will forage on forest tracks. Alternatively, you can walk trails quietly in the *Afzelia* and listen for birds foraging in the dry leaf litter,

something **Golden-rumped Elephant-shrews** do too, so prepare to keep looking. Simply sitting and waiting in appropriate shady habitat may yield a view and the first track into the forest, the Gede walking trail, is a good place to try for this bird. It has become much more difficult to find at Gede Ruins.

**East Coast Akalat:** another skulker, but the akalat is resident all year round, rather more common, and sings on territory with a sort of rapid repeated warbling. The *Afzeli* which leads in from the first junction on the Mida track is good for akalat, but searches there demand patience. Akalats respond rapidly to tape of their song, so it is vital that playback is used very sparingly. They prefer to feed down in the bottom storey often flying from low perches to grab food off the ground.

**Amani Sunbird:** possibly the easiest of the six Red Data Book species to locate, this tiny sunbird is usually found high in the canopy of *Brachystegia* trees. It occurs in both primary and degraded forest, but at higher densities in the former. Amanis may join the mixed species flocks led by **Little Yellow Flycatchers** and **Black-headed Apalises** and draw attention with sharp high-pitched calls. They are usually found in pairs.

**Sokoke Pipit:** one of the hardest birds to find, the pipit is thinly distributed in all three habitats, appearing in slightly higher densities where the forest is in primary condition. It is a match for the ground-thrush on the skulking front, but at least the pipits reveal their whereabouts with a wheezing high-pitched call. They also have a dipping display flight, performed in a circuit above the canopy, but they tend to fly too high to allow good views. Normally birds flush from under your

feet or in front of a vehicle. They will fly up into the low storeys, not normally more than two to three metres up, and call. If you stand still, they will often drop back onto the litter, and return to foraging with their rather cautious, clockwork progress.

**Clarke's Weaver:** this is unlikely to be confused with the only other weaver seen regularly in the forest, the larger **Dark-backed Weaver**. Clarke's is a small forest weaver usually encountered in the *Brachystegia* canopy, sometime hundreds together, and often in mixed species flocks. Groups are noisy uttering a constant chatter which can carry some distance, and flocks over the canopy often utter a distinct sharp *chet* in flight. They are enigmatic and, since their nests have never been found, it remains possible, perhaps probable, that they move away from Sokoke to breed during the dry season, at the start of the year. The bulk of the records fall in the period August to November, but they have been seen in most other months, and it is possible that some birds at least remain in the forest all year round.

### Notes on groups:

**Raptors:** including overfliers such as **Bateleur** *Terathopius ecaudatus*, 23 species of birds of prey have been recorded. Sokoke is a stronghold of **Southern Banded Snake Eagle** *Circaetus fasciolatus* which can be seen and heard performing display flights high above the forest (it has a far-carrying guttural *kruk-kruk-karoo* call). **Bat Hawk** *Macheiramphus alcinus* is rarely seen in Sokoke, but is not uncommonly seen over Mida Creek in the late afternoon and early evening. Although **Bat Hawks** are crepuscular, some, especially younger birds, fly during the day. They are almost impossible to guarantee but, as dusk approaches, it is worth remembering to keep an eye out throughout the Watamu to Malindi area. Three accipiters, **Great Sparrowhawk**, **African Goshawk** and **Little Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter minullus*, occur, but only **African Goshawk** is seen regularly. **Lizard Buzzard** *Kaupifalco monogrammicus* is common on the forest fringe or in the degraded areas. Another enigmatic species is **Cuckoo Falcon** *Aviceda cuculoides*, which sometimes occurs in reasonable numbers between May and November. It occupies dense, forest-edge habitat, but may be seen perched out in the open on telegraph wires. Don't be too surprised if you hear **African Fish-Eagle** *Haliaeetus vocifer*, since they are common at Mida Creek, and visit the pools in the forest, often soaring on thermals and calling high overhead. If the call does appear to be coming from the forest floor, it is almost certainly a mimicking **Red-capped Robin-chat**.



Spotted Ground-thrush *Turdus fischeri*  
by Martin Woodcock

**Cuckoos:** if you are lucky, **Thick-billed Cuckoo** *Pacchycoccyx audeberti* is a real catch in Sokoke where it parasitises **Retz's Helmet-shrike**. In the short rains (October–November), the cuckoos draw attention with buoyant, noisy display flights over the canopy. In April, **European Cuckoos** *Cuculus canorus* and the similar, but smaller **Asian Lesser Cuckoo** *C. poliocephalus* (split from **Madagascar Lesser Cuckoo** *C. rochii* which occurs rarely in western Kenya) sometimes flood through the forest, occurring in abundance for a couple of weeks and then disappearing. Beware the striking hepatic form of **Asian Lesser Cuckoo** which is brick red and quite a shock to the unwary.

**Other owls and nightjars:** **Barn Owl** *Tyto alba* is not uncommon at Gede and can be seen roosting in the old wells there. **African Wood Owl** *Ciccaba woodfordii* is also fairly common in both the *Afzelia* and *Cynometra* forest, but the other interesting species is **Barred Owlet**, which is regular in the *Brachystegia* woodland. **Verreaux's Eagle Owl** *Bubo lacteus* also occurs at low densities. **Fiery-necked Nightjar** *Caprimulgus pectoralis* is common in the forest, and may be flushed from leaf litter during the day, but is more often seen on tracks at night, when its wild and haunting call is everywhere.

**Honeyguides:** five species occur in Sokoke, with **Lesser Honeyguide** *Indicator minor* and **Scaly-throated Honeyguide** *I. variegatus*, being fairly easy to locate by their calls in the *Brachystegia* woodlands. **Lesser** make a staccato repeated *chip-chip-chip*, while **Scaly-throated** repeats a dull trill which ascends a scale, most notably at the end. **Black-throated Honeyguide** *I. indicator* is less common, while both **Pallid Honeyguide** *I. meliphilus* and **Eastern Honeybird** *Prodotiscus zambesiae* are rare. The latter prefers the dense cover of *Afzelia* forest.

**Spinetails and swifts:** two spinetails, **Boehm's Neafrapus boehmi** and **Mottle-throated Telacanthura ussheri** occur, with the slurred high-pitched screams of **Boehm's** often revealing their presence in small parties above the *Brachystegia* canopy. The larger **Mottle-throated** is often easier to see away from the forest and may be seen over hotels in Watamu! **Forbes-Watson's Swift** *Apus berliozii* is a prize bird and winters over the forest, and can be seen over Mida Creek from November to March.

**Greenbuls:** eight species occur with the distinctive **Common Bulbul** and **Zanzibar Sombre Greenbul** having invaded parts of the forest, along with **Northern Brownbul** *Phyllastrephus strepitans* which occurs in small flocks in the *Brachystegia* woodlands where it has been degraded to form thickets and glades. **Yellow-bellied Greenbul**, the largest

species, is common throughout, drawing attention with its gruff call and song, and easily told by its size, sulphur yellow-green breast and underwing, as well as a distinct short pale supercilium over its red-brown eye. **Nicator** is widespread but skulking, although they will forage high up and can be easily identified due to their spotted wing coverts. Two of the remaining three species, **Fischer's Greenbul** and **Tiny Greenbul**, are confined to the thickest *Afzelia* and *Cynometra*. Both have creamy white eyes, but the **Tiny** really is tiny with a greyish head and green back and under parts, while **Fischer's** is uniformly dull-grey brown with a slight yellow wash below. They occur in small parties. The final species, **Brownbul** *Phyllastrephus terrestris* is very similar to **Northern Brownbul**, but is slightly larger, has a wine red, rather than brown-red, eye and calls with a rather more level staccato chatter. It is poorly known in the forest and rarely seen in dense areas of the *Afzelia* and *Cynometra* belt.

**Other sunbirds:** apart from **Amani**, there are five other species in descending order of abundance: **Collared, Olive, Plain-backed, Amethyst, and Mouse-coloured**. Like **Collared, Olive** occurs throughout, but prefers dense cover, **Plain-backed** is confined mainly to the undisturbed *Afzelia* and *Cynometra*, while **Amethyst** occurs at very low densities in the *Brachystegia*, and **Mouse-coloured** (which is really best seen in hotel gardens) has invaded badly degraded areas, notably in the *Cynometra*.

## Records

Please remember to submit your observations to Don Turner, EANHS Ornithological Sub-committee, Box 48019 Nairobi, Kenya (see *Bull ABC* 1: 46).

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## Reference

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Top left: *Brachystegia* canopy in new leaf, critical habitat for several rare species.  
 En haut à gauche: nouveau feuillage de *Brachystegia*, habitat essentiel pour plusieurs espèces rares.  
 Bottom left: Amani Sunbird, a male.  
 En bas à gauche: Souïmanga d'Amani, spécimen mâle.

Centre: SPOT satellite image of Arabuko-Sokoko Forest.  
 Au centre: Image par satellite SPOT de la forêt d'Arabuko-Sokoko.  
 Bottom right: Clarke's Weaver, a male in breeding plumage.  
 En bas à droite: Tisserin de Clarke, spécimen mâle avec plumage nuptial.

(All photographs by John Fanshawe)